



Taking a total immersion language course is a great way to improve your French, as well as being a fantastic holiday, as **DEBORAH CURTIS** finds out

When learning French there comes a point when listening and repeating phrases, watching French TV or films and reading French books or magazines is no longer enough. A language is a living thing – fluid, ever-changing – and the only way to really discover how your studies are progressing is to practise it – a lot – preferably with real live experts... the French; ideally in France.

For the Anglophone trying to get to grips with *la langue française*, there can be no better way to push your learning on a leap than by taking the plunge into a total immersion language course; to speak, hear, read and write nothing but French for the duration of your stay.

Not for the terminally shy perhaps but a very effective way to make some real progress and to keep you motivated; not to mention a brilliant opportunity to learn about French food, life and culture, which all come as part of the package.

So it was with all this in mind that I gathered my courage, packed a ludicrously heavy suitcase; full of dictionaries and grammar books – don't do this: you won't need them – and set off for the Dordogne to join a total immersion language course run by Englishwoman Jane Hanslip.

Jane began running language courses in 2004. Her pretty *chambres d'hôtes*, Le Bourdil Blanc, are set back from the D21 in bucolic grounds, near the village of St-Sauveur, just ten minutes outside Bergerac. A fluent French speaker herself, she started these language holidays because she strongly believes that if you enjoy visiting France or would like to live there permanently, you should really try and get to grips with the language too.

"When I talk to expats who live here, they say that not being able to speak the language is one of the main reasons why people go back," she says. "These courses ▶



ABOVE: Le Bourdil Blanc; Alexandre's classes are lively; Market day in Issegeac

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS: DEBORAH CURTIS



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are designed to encourage people both to learn French and to gain confidence speaking as well as to learn about the culture, the customs, the food and the wine.”

Formal lessons

The premise is simple but it works. Eight or so people – the groups are kept deliberately small – who are likely to have never met before, book a place on the course and travel to Dordogne in varying degrees of trepidation. They are met at either station or airport by Jane herself and from the moment they unpack they live and breathe French and the French way of life for the duration of their stay; sometimes in formal lessons and the rest of the time getting out and about on excursions, reading, talking and socialising.

Within minutes of arriving guests feel instantly at home. Jane has the uncanny ability to be both unerringly welcoming and hospitable while at the same time stepping back and letting her guests get on with it. The result is that you immediately feel able to relax, be yourself and throw yourself into the unfolding story of your week at Le Bourdil.

The house itself is beautiful, a *gentilhommière* (manor house) clad in pretty green foliage. There are eight bedrooms, each with its own bathroom and they are comfortably furnished with antiques and *brocante*. The gardens are extensive and if you decide to take a stroll around the lake you will more than likely be joined by Jane’s bilingual Labradors Ebony and Balthazar who will be forever a friend if you throw them a ball or two.

The French speaking begins almost

immediately and from then on almost all communication is in French. Jane is adamant and determined that everyone will make the most of their stay at Le Bourdil. Without such a strong character orchestrating proceedings it would be tempting to lapse into your mother tongue but she will have none of it and everyone is encouraged to join in the conversation particularly at mealtimes, which are a chance for lively discussion and debate.

After a day to settle in, the course proper began with the arrival of our flamboyant teacher Alexandre Gendre. A wine-maker from a small village near the famous *appellation* Saint-Émilion, Alexandre is an amazing teacher. He was altogether patient, enthusiastic, inspiring, meticulous and demanding; always ensuring that no one was left out of the



conversation and that everyone was making the most of their visit.

Fascinating excursions

After the first day, which we spent visiting the market at Issigeac, picnicking by the lake in the shadow of the château at Lanquais and exploring the Périgordine villages of Beaumont-du-Périgord, St-Avit-Sénieur and Montferrand-du-Périgord, we were divided up into two groups; Alexandre having used the first day's conversation to assess our levels – either beginner or intermediate/advanced.

On Monday, the work began. This is not a holiday per se, however delicious the food, charming the scenery and fascinating the excursions. To get the most out of your week you must be prepared to throw yourself in head first and go for it. Every morning between 9.30am and 1pm

we worked really hard. Most lunchtimes my brain felt like scrambled knitting but as the week went on knots started to untie and the pattern became clearer.

Our other teacher Sophie de Mullenheim – who was standing in temporarily for the regular teacher, her mother Brigitte de Mullenheim – had a style very different to that of Alexandre. Where he was flamboyant, mischievous and charismatic, she was calm, unhurried and gentle. More used to teaching ten-year-olds at a school in Paris, she found us willing students as we tried to wrap our minds round some tricky grammatical exercises.

She was also fond of getting us to do *une petite dictée* which for someone like myself who hadn't done a formal class in French since O level, was something of a challenge. Reading aloud to the group

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT: Shopping in Issegeac is a great way to practise your French BOTTOM LEFT: Jane's dogs Ebony and Balthazar enjoy an excursion BOTTOM CENTRE: Listening to native speakers is a great way to learn CENTRE: The Château de Bannes is privately owned ABOVE LEFT: The lessons continue *en plein air* in Périgueux ABOVE CENTRE: Lunch is a convivial occasion ABOVE RIGHT: A quaint corner of Bergerac ABOVE: Wine-tasting with the Countess de Bosredon

pushed a couple of us out of our comfort zones too but with careful correction our accents began to improve noticeably and the subject matter sparked interesting class discussions.

In Alexandre's lessons the tempo was increased. A master at explaining the derivation of words and how they fit into ▶

FRANCOFILE

Le Bourdil Blanc

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Courses run from Saturday to Saturday and cost £750 per person (based on two people sharing a double room) and £830 per person (based on single room occupancy). The holiday includes all tuition; transport; guides and entry fees as well as seven nights' accommodation with private bathroom; full board which includes breakfasts, lunches and dinners and all drinks including one lunch at a local restaurant. The holiday also includes transfers to and from Bergerac airport and use of tennis courts, swimming pool, a lake for boating and fishing, mountain bikes, table tennis and croquet. Transport by air, rail or car to



and from Bergerac airport is not included in the price. The low-cost airlines, Flybe and Ryanair, fly to Bergerac.

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Comte de Bosredon

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their historical context, his lessons were a fascinating insight into the French language from a cultural and linguistic perspective. He was horrified that we didn't know either the story behind or the meaning of the motto of the Order of the Garter – *Honni soit qui mal y pense* / Shame on him who thinks evil upon it – which he rectified with a detailed explanation, which, if nothing else, underlined the close historical and linguistic relationship that has existed between England and France for centuries.

Dictation passages

He too was fond of a *petite dictée* or two although his were a lot tougher and quickly exposed the weaknesses in the sorry state of my written French. Having him go through the dictation passages with a red pen was a rather unedifying experience but he managed to combine meticulous correction with inspiration to improve; his love of and interest in his native language engendering a desire to get better at it myself.

It was the same with regard to our pronunciation and although the faint-hearted might be put off to have their

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accent regularly corrected, it was actually enormously helpful whatever level of French you currently find yourself; especially when you realise how changing a sound even slightly can change the meaning of a word completely – occasionally with embarrassing results...

But it wasn't all formal lessons. The beauty of this course was that after lunch – during which everyone was encouraged to contribute to the conversation – we were taken out on numerous excursions. As a result we didn't feel as though we were living in suspended isolation in France; we got out and about and



ABOVE: The famous vines run right up to the entrance of the Château de Montbazillac

explored Dordogne too – in French of course.

So by the end of the week, we had been to Bordeaux, Montbazillac and Périgueux; we'd wandered round French markets, seen breathtakingly beautiful churches and admired the majestic, sweeping River Dordogne; we'd had a whistle-stop tour of Saint-Émilion and had a fascinating tour of the surrounding vineyards. We'd been to a wine-tasting hosted by the Count and Countess de Bosredon at their hilltop Château Belingard and had an in-depth talk on how fundamental wine-making is to the economic prosperity of this beautiful part of France.

On our last dinner together – all the delicious meals are cooked by Jane's resident chef Bernadette Canovas and created to give a flavour of the gastronomy of the region – we reflected on the week and all agreed that it had been fantastic.

From a language point of view we all felt we'd made significant progress and were all inspired to continue working on our French when we got home. From a social and cultural point of view we'd had the chance to get to know a beautiful part of France with our teacher/guide Alexandre who gave so generously of his time and energy to make sure we made the most of our trip. As a holiday/study combination it doesn't come better than this. 🍷